About the Author

Raymond Williams was born in 1921 at the Welsh border village of Pandy. He was educated at Trinity College, Cambridge, and served in the Second World War in the Guards Armoured Division. After the war he was appointed an adult education tutor at Oxford University. In 1961 he was elected fellow of Jesus College, Cambridge, and university lecturer in English; in 1974 he was appointed Professor of Drama. He died in 1987.

and practical sense, is quite reasonable. But to see them as marginal or peripheral is something else again. The modern convergence, which the contemporary sociology of culture embodies, is in fact an attempt to rework, from a particular set of interests, those general social and sociological ideas within which it has been possible to see communication, language and art as marginal and peripheral, or as at best secondary and derived social processes. A modern sociology of culture, whether in its internal studies or in its interventions in a more general sociology, is concerned above all to enquire, actively and openly, into these received and presumed relations, and into other possible and demonstrable relations. As such it is not only reworking its own field, but putting new questions and new evidence into the general work of the social sciences.

'Culture'

Both the problem and the interest of the sociology of culture can be seen at once in the difficulty of its apparently defining term: 'culture'. The history and usage of this exceptionally complex term can be studied in Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) and Williams (1958 and 1975). Beginning as a noun of process – the culture (cultivation) of crops or (rearing and breeding) of animals, and by extension the culture (active cultivation) of the human mind – it became in the late eighteenth century, especially in German and English, a noun of configuration or generalization of the 'spirit' which informed the 'whole way of life' of a distinct people. Herder (1784–91) first used the significant plural, 'cultures', in deliberate distinction from any singular or, as we would now say, unilinear sense of 'civilization'. The broad pluralist term was then especially important in the nineteenth-century develop-

ment of comparative anthropology, where it has continued to designate a whole and distinctive way of life.

But there are then fundamental questions about the nature of the formative or determining elements which produce these distinctive cultures. Alternative answers to these questions have produced a range of effective meanings, both within anthropology and in extension from it: from the older emphasis on an 'informing spirit' – ideal or religious or national – to more modern emphasis on a 'lived culture' which has been primarily determined by other and now differently designated social processes – usually particular kinds of political or economic order. In the alternative and contending intellectual traditions which have flowed from this range of answers, 'culture' itself then ranges from a significantly total to a confidently partial dimension of reference.

Meanwhile, in more general usage, there was a strong development of the sense of 'culture' as the active cultivation of the mind. We can distinguish a range of meanings from (i) a developed state of mind – as in 'a person of culture', 'a cultured person' to (ii) the processes of this development – as in 'cultural interests', 'cultural activities' to (iii) the means of these processes – as in culture as 'the arts' and 'humane intellectual works'. In our own time (iii) is the most common general meaning, though all are current. It coexists, often uneasily, with the anthropological and extended sociological use to indicate the 'whole way of life' of a distinct people or other social group.

The difficulty of the term is then obvious, but can be most usefully seen as the result of earlier kinds of convergence of interests. We can distinguish two main kinds: (a) an emphasis on the 'informing spirit' of a whole way of life, which is manifest over the whole range of social activities but is most evident in 'specifically cultural' activities – a language, styles of art, kinds of intellec-
tual work; and (b) an emphasis on ‘a whole social order’ within which a specifiable culture, in styles of art and kinds of intellectual work, is seen as the direct or indirect product of an order primarily constituted by other social activities.

These positions are often classified as (a) idealist and (b) materialist, though it should be noted that in (b) materialist explanation is commonly reserved to the other, ‘primary’, activities, leaving ‘culture’ to a version of the ‘informing spirit’, of course now differently based and not primary but secondary. Yet the importance of each position, by contrast with other forms of thought, is that it leads, necessarily, to intensive study of the relations between ‘cultural’ activities and other forms of social life. Each position implies a broad method: in (a) illustration and clarification of the ‘informing spirit’, as in national histories of styles of art and kinds of intellectual work which manifest, in relation with other institutions and activities, the central interests and values of a ‘people’; in (b) exploration from the known or discoverable character of a general social order to the specific forms taken by its cultural manifestations.

The sociology of culture, as it entered the second half of the twentieth century, was broadly compounded of work done from these two positions, much of it of great local value. Each position represented a form of that convergence of interests which the term ‘culture’ itself, with its persistent range of relational emphases, notably exemplifies. But in contemporary work, while each of the earlier positions is still held and practised, a new kind of convergence is becoming evident.

This has many elements in common with (b), in its emphasis on a whole social order, but it differs from it in its insistence that ‘cultural practice’ and ‘cultural production’ (its most recognizable terms) are not simply derived from an otherwise constituted social order but are themselves major elements in its constitution. It then shares some elements with (a), in its emphasis on cultural practices as (though now among others) constitutive. But instead of the ‘informing spirit’ which was held to constitute all other activities, it sees culture as the signifying system through which necessarily (though among other means) a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored.

Thus there is some practical convergence between (i) the anthropological and sociological senses of culture as a distinct ‘whole way of life’, within which, now, a distinctive signifying system is seen not only as essential but as essentially involved in all forms of social activity, and (ii) the more specialized if also more common sense of culture as ‘artistic and intellectual activities’, though these, because of the emphasis on a general signifying system, are now much more broadly defined, to include not only the traditional arts and forms of intellectual production but also all the ‘signifying practices’ – from language through the arts and philosophy to journalism, fashion and advertising – which now constitute this complex and necessarily extended field.

This book is written within the terms of this contemporary convergence. In some of its chapters, notably 4, 5, 7 and 8, it deals with questions over its whole range. In its other chapters, while conscious of the general field, it deliberately concentrates on ‘the arts’ in their most common received sense. The work of the new convergence has been best and most frequently done, either in general theory and in studies of ideology, or in its distinctively new areas of interest, in ‘the media’ and ‘popular culture’. There is then not only a relative gap to be filled, in these new terms, but also, from the quality of some of the work on the arts carried out from other positions, a sense of challenge: indeed a sense that it may be above all in this still